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Pattern of conferences

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Remote interpretation

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the reports of the Secretary-General on provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States (A/55/182), improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/55/259) and remote interpretation (A/55/134). During its consideration of the reports, the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information.

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

2. The Advisory Committee notes from paragraphs 6 and 7 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/55/182) that, for the period from 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000, all of the 41 requests for provision of conference services to regional and other major groupings were met at Geneva. For the same period in New York, 100 per cent of the 1,194 requests for facilities alone were met, while a total of 84 per cent (269) of the 321 requests for interpretation services by regional and other major groupings were met. The Advisory Committee notes that this represents an

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improvement over the 1997-1998 period, when 81 per cent of such requests for interpretation were met.

3. The General Assembly has mandated the Secretariat to make provision in its requests for resources for the servicing of such groups, while at the same time maintaining its decision that services should be provided on an as-available basis, without any servicing capacity being specifically allocated for that purpose and with priority being given to meetings included in the calendar of conferences and meetings. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, although the Secretariat does not specifically budget for these groupings, budgetary estimates are based on previous experience, which includes the data relating to meetings of regional and other major groupings. Thus, the resource requirements for provision of interpretation services to such meetings are taken into account in the budget estimates.

4. As indicated in paragraph 8 of the report, during the 12-month period from 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000, a number of difficulties arose which prevented the Secretariat from meeting all of the requests for interpretation services. The Advisory Committee was also informed by the representatives of the Secretary-General that one of the problems was the fact that, in the proposed programme budget for 2000-2001, temporary assistance funds had been reduced on the basis of experience in the previous biennium. In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls its statement in paragraph I.40 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001 that "proposed reductions in temporary assistance for meetings need to be evaluated in the light of apparent and persistent instances of problems concerning the level and quality of a number of services, such as translation, interpretation and timely publication of official records".[1] In the opinion of the Advisory Committee, the issue of general temporary assistance should be addressed in the context of the preparation of the programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003. In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls the report of the Secretary-General on the comprehensive study on conference services (A/C.5/49/34 and Corr.1), the findings and conclusions of which were endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/221 C of 23 December 1994; the Advisory Committee believes that the time has come to assess its implementation.

Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

5. In its resolution 54/248 B of 23 December 1999, the General Assembly, inter alia, expressed concern that the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi were still underutilized and reiterated its call for better utilization of the facilities. As a measure to facilitate greater utilization of the Nairobi conference facilities, the Assembly also decided to establish a permanent interpretation service within the United Nations Office at Nairobi no later than January 2001. The report of the Secretary-General (A/55/259) is submitted in pursuance of resolution 54/248 B.

6. As indicated in paragraph 9 of the report, the total number of meetings with interpretation actually held at Nairobi in 1999 was 254, of which 32 were meetings of calendar bodies, while the remaining 222 were meetings of intergovernmental and expert groups related to both the United Nations and other organizations. The

number of events without interpretation was 354. The Advisory Committee notes the statements in paragraph 17 of the report that the decision to create a permanent interpretation service at Nairobi will have a dramatic impact on meeting activities at Nairobi, and that there are strong indications that interest in the United Nations Office at Nairobi as a venue for conferences and meetings exists not only among United Nations agencies based in Nairobi, but also among non-United Nations entities. Moreover, the Advisory Committee has been informed that, beginning in 2001, the Committee of Permanent Representatives will have interpretation services.

7. Upon enquiry as to how the team of interpreters would be used optimally, the Advisory Committee was informed that a number of possibilities were under consideration for using interpretation facilities when they were not required for meetings at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. These included: (a) using the team at other United Nations regional offices, such as the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific or the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, at which there is no permanent establishment of interpreters; (b) using interpreters for translation; and (c) remote interpretation from Nairobi, once the technology is in place.

8. The Advisory Committee was informed that the creation of the permanent interpretation service at Nairobi was well under way and that it would be in place by January 2001, as requested by the General Assembly. A breakdown of the costs associated with the establishment of the team of interpreters as compared with interpretation costs in 1999 was requested and should be provided to the Fifth Committee.

Remote interpretation

9. In its resolution 54/248 D, the General Assembly, inter alia, requested the Secretary-General to keep under review the introduction and use of any new technology, in particular remote interpretation, and to report thereon to the Assembly on a regular basis. The report of the Secretary-General on remote interpretation (A/55/134) is submitted pursuant to that request. As indicated in the report, an experiment in remote interpretation involving the servicing from Geneva of a full-scale intergovernmental meeting, with six languages, to be held at Nairobi, was planned for 2000. Moreover, according to the report, owing to a number of technical difficulties combined with timing problems, it was determined that the experiment, which had been scheduled to take place between 8 and 12 May 2000, was no longer viable, and it was therefore called off.

10. The Advisory Committee regrets that the experiment did not take place and urges the Secretariat to clarify the technical issues involved as quickly as possible.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 7* (A/54/7). See also paragraphs VIII.56 to VIII.60 of the first report of the Advisory Committee on the proposed programme budget for 1996-1997 (A/50/7).